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# The Age of Infrastructure: The Triumph and Tragedy of the Progressive Civil Religion

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## The Age of Infrastructure



Propaganda Poster from the Second World War  
Celebrating the Force and Magnitude of the Tennessee Valley Authority  
Ten Years After its Inception

THE AGE OF INFRASTRUCTURE:  
THE TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY OF THE  
PROGRESSIVE CIVIL RELIGION

*Joseph Kiernan*

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“And what is faith? It is not born solely or largely by the actions of one but through the contributions of millions living in the spirit of justice, with due consideration for the burdens and rights of all others.”

– Senator George W. Norris (R-NE)<sup>1</sup>

INTRODUCTION

During the 1930s, simmering progressivism erupted into furious activity, initiating the Age of Infrastructure in the United States of America (U.S.). After decades of piecemeal development of roads and railways at the hands of states and private corporations, Washington, D.C. took command. Gone were the railroad cabals of Charles Crocker, James J. Hill, Mark Hopkins, Collis Huntington, Leland Stanford, and Cornelius Vanderbilt. Now, economic crisis and rural poverty had galvanized unprecedented popular support for government intervention. Under the guidance of ideological heavyweights, the federal government seized the reins of infrastructure development in the United States, fusing decades of stewing resentment of corporate greed with a New Deal checkbook. Commissions, rather than corporations, laid asphalt, hung wire, bridged valleys, and dammed rivers. It was an era in which men of a singular, unstoppable vision—David Lilienthal, George W. Norris, and Franklin D. Roosevelt—acquired the means to substantiate their dreams.

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Thus, this is the story of Senator George W. Norris, a Republican from Nebraska, who fought to expand government to an unprecedented level in his crusade against poverty and injustice. The bane of the imperious Speaker Joseph Cannon (R-IL), Norris took on distinguished industrialist Henry Ford and won. Norris also challenged his own political party with his unyielding beliefs, leaving a legacy of concrete and light.

In his devotion to the progressive cause, Norris earned no shortage of foes. Consequently, this is also the story of his opponent, a Democrat-turned-Republican named Wendell Willkie of Indiana, who fought Norris and the Senator's creation, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), in an effort to protect free enterprise from government coercion. Willkie, armed with a passion that earned him national notoriety and widespread respect, sought to check the excesses of the "progressive civil religion of infrastructure" when its adherents, empowered by the government, began to infringe on the fundamental values of freedom. The TVA survives as an enduring symbol of the New Deal, but its roots reached deeper than the Executive Branch's campaign against the blight of the Great Depression (1929-1939).

The progressive civil religion did not emerge *ex nihilo* in the tempestuous first hundred days of the New Deal. Its origins were older, growing in the Great Plains among disaffected farmers and in the parlors of Boston's Brahmins. Its adherents ranged from the Protestant Nebraskans who sent George W. Norris to Congress for almost forty years, even when he committed the most egregious of political heresies, to the social reforming elite of Manhattan, who handed a young, brilliant civil servant named Robert Moses the power to reshape their world. The progressive civil religion took many shapes such as, *inter alia*, the campaigns of trustbusters and yellow journalists to curb corporate power, the conservationism of Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, and Social Security. However, in doing so, the New Deal empowered a unique strain of the ecumenical progressive civil

religion: a progressive crusade for infrastructure. This was the faith of Norris, mixing agrarian nationalism, progressivism, and populism with a deep distrust of capitalism and an unrelenting confidence in the altruistic potential of government.<sup>2</sup> This radical denomination, the constant frustration of internationalists and free marketers, was built on a core belief that the government's role was not only to moderate and to regulate the excesses of American capitalists, but also to serve as the egalitarian vanguard of a better, fairer society.

In the pursuit of its agenda, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration handed the instruments of state to men such as Norris to build infrastructure for the American people and to engineer a new society. When unchecked, the progressive civil religion led down a dark road to paternalism and arrogant trampling of core American economic freedoms. At its worst, the progressive civil religion of infrastructure was a self-righteous crusade for a moral, just society that denigrated the folly of individualism and the American belief in productive self-advancement. However, when moderated by legitimate criticism and motivated by unflagging commitment to the national need, this liberal creed could master the natural power of the United States for the common good, and uplift millions to the American Dream. Its prophets seized upon a unique moment in American history, carving the physical scripture of this populist faith into the land for posterity.

### THE ROAD TO MUSCLE SHOALS

The series of events that led to the birth of the TVA began far across the Pacific Ocean in the tense summer months of 1914. The spiraling diplomatic crisis in Europe spurred tensions that reverberated throughout the Kaiser's Pacific possessions. As war threatened to break out across Europe, German Vice-Admiral Maximillian Reichsgraf von Spee, on tour with the battleships SMS *Scharnhorst* and SMS *Gneisenau* en route



to Truk in Micronesia, contemplated the options for his fleet, the German East Asian Cruiser Squadron. Should the pressures of the summer erupt into armed conflict, Germany would have limited naval resources abroad to defend its Pacific possessions.

The Triple Entente Powers, especially Britain and her bilateral ally Japan, had relative naval superiority in the Asian Pacific Rim. Ultimately, when the July Crisis degraded into the inception of the First World War (1914-1918) in August, Spee opted to sail towards South America, seeking neutral colliers and plotting a path back towards the Fatherland. British and American naval strategists eyed Spee's voyage with concern as the Germans cruised toward Cape Horn, Chile. Although the East Asian flotilla faced defeat at the hands of the British Royal Navy off the Falkland Islands, the German escapades in the Pacific, combined with the privateering cruiser SMS *Emden's* activities near British India, unnerved the Triple Entente Powers.

The German naval presence off the Chilean coast raised concerns in the United States, a neutral but nervous power.<sup>3</sup> At the time, Chile was the major exporter of nitrates to the U.S., critical for producing fertilizers and explosives, both resources of profound strategic importance. In the arid northern reaches of the long littoral country, huge nitrate deposits at Antofagasta and Tarapacá attracted foreign firms from Britain, Germany, and the United States to harvest this vital ingredient for modern agriculture and weaponry.<sup>4</sup>

With the advent of hostilities, the Germans, now cut off from global trade by the British blockade, developed nitrogen fixation methods (the Haber process) to produce sufficient materiel domestically. The German innovations and German investments in hydroelectric energy to power the nitrate production ensured a steady supply of shells for Krupp guns in northern France. They also helped feed the hungry Reich, where the agricultural output per acre outpaced most peer countries.<sup>5</sup> The United States, however, had no reserve supply of nitrates, was still reliant on Chilean imports.<sup>6</sup> In a time of global war and

commerce raiding, the sea lines of communication to Tarapacá seemed more vulnerable than ever.

As the specter of armed conflict loomed, American military planners fretted over the nitrate problem. On December 27, 1915, Brigadier General Crozier, the U.S. Army Chief of Ordnance, called for the development of air-made nitrate production in the United States. With the potential for U.S. involvement rising, the United States' dependency on Chile for critical munitions became a political issue. German privateering and heightened submarine warfare in the North Atlantic Ocean demonstrated how hostile maritime activity could interdict trade, potentially debilitating American military preparedness.<sup>7</sup>

On June 3, 1916, in response to the mounting likelihood of war, President Woodrow Wilson signed the National Defense Act (NDA), a comprehensive bill to reorganize and modernize the armed forces of the United States.<sup>8</sup> The nitrate issue was a component of the broad legislative initiative. Under pressure from Muscle Shoals, Alabama, where business interests and impoverished southerners backed the construction of a dam and a nitrate plant along the Tennessee River, Senator Oscar Underwood (D-AL) fought to include Section 124 in the NDA, the "Nitrate Supply." Section 124 "empowered" the President to "determine the best, cheapest, and most available means for the production of nitrates...upon any...river" and authorized the Executive "to construct, maintain, and operate...dams, locks, improvements to navigation, power houses...for the generation of [electricity]" and "the production of nitrates."<sup>9</sup> Muscle Shoals, positioned along the mighty Tennessee River, was an ideal location. The federally-run project would direct millions of federal dollars into the needy region and jumpstart an industrial awakening in a significant portion of the sleepy South.

In the early twentieth century, the Tennessee Valley had not shared in the economic prosperity brought by industrialization. The region, following the river from its sources in western Virginia and North Carolina, snaked from the highlands of East

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Tennessee past Knoxville and Chattanooga down into northern Alabama and Mississippi before turning northward back through West Tennessee to join the Ohio River near Paducah, Kentucky. Unlike the rich metallurgical mecca of the upper Ohio River and the Great Lakes region, the Tennessee Valley was dependent on a faltering agricultural base. From the late nineteenth century to the 1920s and 1930s, the size of farms diminished and the number of tenant farmers tripled as population growth and productivity stagnated.<sup>10</sup> Thus, for socioeconomic as well as military reasons, Muscle Shoals seemed an ideal location for the Section 124 nitrate plant and accompanying hydroelectric dam.

When word of the site's selection reached northern Alabama, thousands flocked to the Muscle Shoals/Florence area, looking for work.<sup>11</sup> Frantic construction on the dam and nitrate plant proceeded as demand for fertilizer and munitions skyrocketed with the deployment of American forces to the Western Front in Belgium and France. However, the end of the war and the return to normalcy ushered in congressional attempts to rein in wartime spending, including cutting the Muscle Shoals initiative. By March 1920, fiscal conservatives sank an appropriations package to continue work on the project, stalling construction indefinitely.<sup>12</sup> The partially-completed facility would remain dormant while national business and political forces battled to see who would control the fate of Muscle Shoals and the Tennessee Valley's development. On one side, the greatest industrialist of the country would seek to build a new Detroit on the Tennessee River. On the other, a mustachioed lawyer from McCook, Nebraska, would seek to stop him.

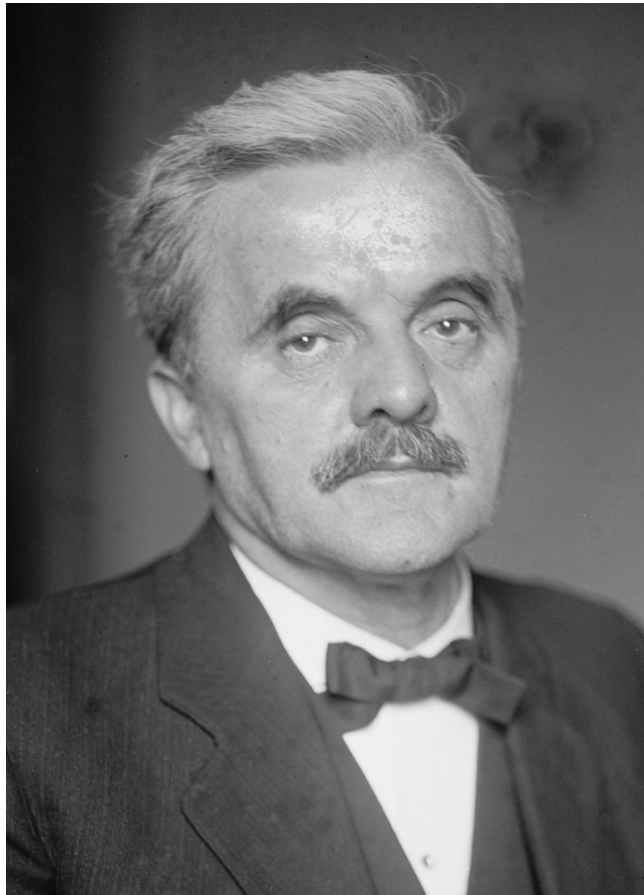
### THE PROPHET FROM NEBRASKA

They called him a "son of the wild jackass," a "radical," a socialist, and a scourge sent to Washington, D.C. for Nebraska's political *schadenfreude*.<sup>13</sup> They also called him the "Fighting Liberal," the "pillar of the New Deal," and "an uncompromising



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foe of special privilege.”<sup>14</sup> Future President John F. Kennedy eulogized him in *Profiles in Courage* (1955). Businessmen damned his liberal tendencies. Presidents of his own political party vetoed his bills and presidents of the other political party supported his reelection. The people of Nebraska chose him to represent them for forty years. To his admirers, he represented them and Americans everywhere, and he fought with an unbridled intensity to defend their democratic rights, to afford them economic opportunity, and to uplift them out of poverty.<sup>15</sup> For his defiance, his leadership, and his uncompromising empathy, George W. Norris is remembered as one of the greatest populist senators in American history.



George W. Norris,  
Senator from Nebraska and  
Leader of the Progressive Civil Religion

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He was also the legislative champion of a faith, the progressive civil religion of infrastructure. Acquainted with the trials of farmers scratching a living out of the Nebraska prairie and the ruinous consequences of capitalist speculation, Norris maintained a deep compassion for the rural poor and a loathing for the capitalist industrialists. His devotion to populist progressivism bordered on zealotry. On politics and religion, Norris once wrote, “True love for humanity is an unselfish desire to perpetuate the welfare and happiness of all the people comprising the government. I think religion is the same thing.”<sup>16</sup> He would attack economic problems with ideological ferocity throughout his long career on the national stage.

Nebraskans elected Norris to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1902.<sup>17</sup> At first, Norris played a quiet role in Congress, serving as a dutiful Republican. However, after five years in the House, his indignation towards the dictatorial management style of Speaker Joseph Cannon grew and so did his penchant for legislative rebellion. In his autobiography, *Fighting Liberal* (1945), Norris reflected, “I doubt if any Speaker in the history of Congress was as ruthless as Joe Cannon was.”<sup>18</sup> Norris, therefore, decided that it was time to curtail the Speaker’s power. In May 1908, he challenged Cannon over the Ballinger-Pinchot controversy, diving into a pool of scandal that rocked the nation.

Specifically, Gifford Pinchot, a favorite of conservationist progressives and hand-picked by President Theodore Roosevelt as the Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, came into conflict with President William Howard Taft’s Secretary of the Interior, Richard Ballinger. Before leaving office, Roosevelt had announced that waterpower was for the “public interest” and directed Pinchot to reserve federal lands for hydroelectric purposes.<sup>19</sup> However, this led to a series of escalating, and highly public, rhetorical brawls between Pinchot and Ballinger once the new Taft administration had settled in. When this conflict began to divide Congress, Cannon backed Ballinger and the White House,

who thought that Pinchot's efforts were a conservationist bridge too far.<sup>20</sup> Conversely, Norris backed the hardline progressive Pinchot. Eventually, Taft sacked Pinchot in January 1910, but Norris had led an effective revolt against the Speaker by aligning the progressives as a united front. The Ballinger-Pinchot controversy widened the divisions between the progressives, led by Theodore Roosevelt, and the conservatives, generally aligned with Taft. Furthermore, the controversy helped to break the back of Cannon's stranglehold on the House, giving Norris a starring role as an insurgent progressive who was willing and able to challenge the powers of his own political party to advance his agenda and defend his values. In hindsight, this would not be the last time that hydropower elicited Norris to revolt.

After his successful transition to the U.S. Senate in the 1912 elections, Norris decided, once again, to buck the GOP in support of Pinchot. In Pennsylvania's 1914 U.S. Senate race, Norris travelled to the state and campaigned for Pinchot against the sitting Republican, Senator Boies Penrose.<sup>21</sup> Interviewed by *The New York Times* a few weeks before the election, Norris remarked, "As a Republican Senator I consider it a duty to my conscience, to decent citizenship, and populist government to oppose with all my power the re-election of Penrose."<sup>22</sup> Although Pinchot failed to defeat Penrose, Norris returned to Washington, D.C. and began developing his position on natural resources. He became a vigorous supporter of the Raker Act of 1913 to allow San Francisco to create a reservoir in the Hetch Hetchy Valley, and a spirited opponent of the private corporations which sought to "protect" the Valley from reservoir development so they could inhibit public control.<sup>23</sup>

Beyond the sphere of progressive domestic policy, Norris achieved fame and infamy for his positions on the rising tensions with Germany. A first-term member of the U.S. Senate, he garnered harsh criticism for his unyielding opposition to American involvement in the First World War. For example, he went on to vote against the declaration of war in April

1914.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, feeling that his ensuing actions incited his constituents, Norris proposed a special recall election in March 1917 so the people could reassess their support for him after he torpedoed an armed ship bill in the Senate through a filibuster.<sup>25</sup> The state committee denied his request for a recall, sparing him the public's wrath. Norris, despite negative prognostications from journalists and political pundits, fared well in the Republican primary the next year and secured a victory in the 1918 general election against Governor John H. Morehead.<sup>26</sup>

Overall, Norris' first term in the U.S. Senate was eventful. His ardor for progressive causes and occasional self-righteousness were emblematic of the maverick career he would continue for the next three decades. Senator Norris came to be a standard-bearer for a distinctly populist, radical progressive civil religion, a new national faith that placed great confidence in the government's ability to solve the ills of mankind. Historian William Leuchtenburg described the progressive belief structure as relying on the "Hamiltonian concept of positive government" where actions were judged by "results achieved" rather than "means employed."<sup>27</sup> Focusing on American foreign policy, Leuchtenburg linked progressivism to imperialism. Although he was certainly a hardline progressive, Norris was no imperialist. His international viewpoint evoked William Jennings Bryan rather than Theodore Roosevelt or Woodrow Wilson.

Norris' introspective progressive civil religion foreshadowed the spirit of the 1930s. For him, the United States could afford little of the burdens of colonial investment when its own citizens cried out for relief. During his career, he did not just advocate for progressivism—labor rights, agricultural aid, and more direct democracy—he lived a progressive life of action seeking to solve problems through political means. His eternal focus was on the promotion of the national welfare, often through his preferred policy bailiwick of agricultural and infrastructural policies. Cautious of foreign entanglements and disconnected from the progressive elites of the coasts,

Norris united a robust faith in domestic progressivism with agrarian populism. Although he had supported Wilson's liberal domestic policies, Norris' strident opposition to the First World War defined his dichotomous civil religion—staunch domestic progressivism and national introversion. Fundamentally, Norris sought the transformation of the regulatory liberal state to an activist national government. He sought to turn pen strokes into shovel-ready projects. He felt that the government must do what private industry did not do—provide for the people. Norris' determination was unwavering despite consistent political setbacks, partially the result of his stubbornness. The Classical Liberal zeitgeist of the 1920s ensured that he was Norris, the Republican renegade. The progressive revolution of the 1930s, the New Deal, put him on the front lines to build what he believed in—the TVA.

### FORD VERSUS NORRIS

On July 8, 1921, George W. Norris' campaign for the TVA began. With the federal funding drought stunting the Muscle Shoals project, auto magnate Henry Ford submitted a proposal to acquire the nitrate plant and dam system through a deal in which his company would operate the facility. This offer included a one hundred year "lease on the Wilson Dam, the No. 3 dam and electric installation, when complete."<sup>28</sup> For southerners, the Ford proposal appeared ideal. The project would be completed and Ford would industrialize the Tennessee Valley, supposedly bringing with him the high-paying manufacturing jobs that had provided for thousands of families throughout the Midwest. Herbert Hoover, the Secretary of Commerce in President Warren G. Harding's administration, voiced his support and admitted that "whatever may be the result, Mr. Ford's offer does prove what the public associations [of the region] have contended, that the completion of the project has a commercial value."<sup>29</sup> The offer, however, required congressional action for approval first.



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As the nitrate plant fell within the purview of agricultural management, the Ford deal bill, S.3420, was sent to the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry. Its chairman was Senator George W. Norris. The Ford offer and the Muscle Shoals issue became the subjects of a lengthy series of hearings in the Committee throughout 1922. The bill's consideration was complicated by the presence of competing business interests which sought to take Muscle Shoals for themselves. Furthermore, the ambiguous contractual language in the bill obfuscated its potential ramifications. This led to a series of complicated discussions peppered with civil engineering technicalities. Norris, however, came prepared.

The testimony from the committee hearings on the bill reveals the strong support from a number of influential southerners for the proposed deal, especially the Alabama delegation. It also illustrates Norris' position on the appropriate role for private corporations and moneyed interests in the production of nitrates and, more importantly, electricity.<sup>30</sup> Hearings began on February 16, 1922, when a delegation from Tennessee led by Governor Alf Taylor arrived to testify. Taylor, highly supportive of the Ford offer, commenced his address to the Committee with the following statement, in which he cited renown inventor Thomas Edison:

[Edison] said in my presence that it was impossible to conceive the immensity of the power that could be produced by that plant when completed, and that the benefits to be derived to the country at large were also inconceivable, and that Henry Ford was the man to take hold and operate it when it was completed, because he was an honest man, and a man of splendid judgment, and a man who had succeeded, and a man who had the money.<sup>31</sup>

Curiously, Taylor's speech continued with a broad appeal against sectionalism and particularism. Perhaps aware of the geographic

diversity of the sixteen committee members and knowing that the economic benefit of the development would be concentrated in the northern Alabama area, only relevant to Senators Pat Harrison (D-MS) and J. Thomas Heflin (D-AL), Taylor adopted a nationwide tone, remarking that “what is good for one section of this Union is good for every section.”<sup>32</sup> The memories of the Civil War were still fresh in the minds of many. Taylor understood that to promote regional infrastructural development, a national justification had to be made. When Norris attempted to advance his own legislation, he would take this lesson to heart.

Later that day, the Committee heard from Robert Campbell, a business organizer from Johnson City, Tennessee. Attempting to elucidate the motivation for Ford’s interest in the project and the bill’s ambiguous language concerning the requirement to actually produce nitrates, the Committee pressed Mr. Campbell on what he considered to be the industrialist’s intentions. Campbell, scrambling for answers, stated, “Mr. Ford’s ambitions can not [sic] any longer demand money. He must want to...build a monument.”<sup>33</sup> Unsatisfied, the Committee members asked Campbell whether, under the proposed statute, Ford would be barred from transitioning to a more profitable industry as profits from fertilizer production were capped at eight percent. Campbell responded, “I trust Mr. Ford...You have to trust somebody.”<sup>34</sup> Senator John W. Harreld (R-OK), suspicious of Ford’s motives, noted that the project was not “altruism.”<sup>35</sup> Norris, who in June of the previous year had proposed the creation of a “Federal Farmer’s Export Financing Corporation” to buy crops from farmers for international resale, agreed with Harreld’s sentiments.<sup>36</sup> It would later become clear that in those cases where a key national interest was concerned, Norris would prefer to inject altruism through the government rather than entrusting a private citizen, such as Henry Ford, to do so instead.

After a brief hiatus, the hearings resumed on April 10, 1922. Once again, the witness, this time Senator Underwood from Alabama, argued that Ford was pursuing the deal for

altruistic reasons. Underwood, who had a clear and compelling interest in facilitating the industrialization of the Muscle Shoals area through Ford's proposal, opined with saccharine hyperbole. After lambasting opponents of the deal, Underwood orated that "[Ford] is prepared to do a great patriotic act for the people of the United States by limiting the amount of his profits and producing fertilizer for them as cheaply as possible."<sup>37</sup>

When the President of the Alabama Power Company, Thomas W. Martin, came to testify on April 11 and April 18, Chairman Norris asked why Alabama power customers faced such high prices and massive discrepancies in kilowatt prices.<sup>38</sup> Norris noted that "there is something wrong if [Alabama municipalities] pay you for their electricity less than a cent and sell it to their people for 12 cents."<sup>39</sup> Martin provided a series of evasive answers, to which Norris provided the counterexample of the low prices enjoyed by electricity customers in Ontario, Canada, where the government ran the power system.<sup>40</sup> Ontario Hydro, which relied on extensive hydroelectric installations along the Niagara River, would become a model for Norris as he conducted independent research on the viability of a government-run power generation and distribution corporation.<sup>41</sup>

By May 1, Norris' patience for Fordists and corporate envoys was wearing thin. William B. Mayo, Chief Engineer of the Ford Motor Company, arrived to testify before the Committee. Norris, unsatisfied with the ambiguity of answers on Ford's ultimate intentions for the plant and dams, was concerned that the industrialist would exploit the contract's loopholes to dupe the government.<sup>42</sup> After an endless series of inane prevarications from Mayo, Norris' tolerance expired and he interjected, "I have been wondering, Mr. Mayo, why is it that, representing Mr. Ford, you are not willing to take the committee and the Congress into your full confidence and let them know just exactly what you expect to do with this power if you get it."<sup>43</sup> Norris continued with his critical rhetoric against private, corporate infrastructure improvements.<sup>44</sup> The ongoing testimonials failed to allay his

fears that once Henry Ford died, the company would repurpose the nitrate facility. Questioning the chairman of the Tennessee River Improvement Association Executive Committee, J.W. Worthington, Norris expressed his irritation that businessmen expected the government to grant Ford a *carte blanche* and trust that his motives aligned with the public interest. Norris remarked, “But [Ford] is not the only man in the country that is good, although he may be one of the best of them.”<sup>45</sup>

Considering Muscle Shoals a matter of national importance, Norris sparred with Worthington, alleging that it was the government’s role to protect the people from Ford. Worthington shot back at the Chairman, quipping, “The people of this country don’t want to be saved.”<sup>46</sup> With that incendiary remark, Worthington touched upon a major component of Norris’ progressive American civil religion. Norris believed that the people needed protection from the profit-driven capitalist class, including Henry Ford, who would use any opportunity to price, gouge, profiteer, or pilfer. To that end, Norris maintained a conviction that it was the government’s role to intervene or preempt to safeguard the public welfare. Conservatives would probably have agreed with Worthington, portraying Norris as self-righteous. But the exchange with Worthington revealed the Nebraska Senator’s faith that Norris knew what the people needed even if they did not, for he knew how to protect them from the dangers of antidemocratic capitalist elites, and he knew that government must be the shield. These convictions undergirded Norris’ political philosophy.

A *New York Times* article from May 10, 1922, captured Norris’ opposition to the Ford deal. Norris remarked that he would permit “no corporation” to take over the Muscle Shoals properties and felt that the bill included an “unconscionable contract.”<sup>47</sup> Agreeing with a statement from the Merchant’s Association on a prior Ford offer to the Secretary of War, Norris believed that a deal with a corporation on Muscle Shoals would represent a major loss for the government.<sup>48</sup> Four days earlier on

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May 6, Norris once again lost his temper in an interaction with a business representative from the Air Nitrates Corporation. Expressing similar sentiments to his comments in April, Norris remarked:

You haven't any assurance that this corporation will benefit the people one iota, and you cannot demonstrate it or show it, and that is where the curse comes in. It will be just like any other corporation. It will be owned by somebody else and will be manipulated just the same as the International Harvester Co. has been manipulated and is being manipulated right now, and the farmer will not be helped any.<sup>49</sup>

With a keen interest in the benefits of hydropower and cheap fertilizer for American farmers, Norris saw Muscle Shoals as an opportunity to replenish the ruined soils of the impoverished Tennessee Valley and to give the people access to affordable electricity. Residents and business interests in the region were eager for the government to complete the dam project for energy generation and navigation purposes. However, the cagy testimony of the parade of corporate officials and the weakness of the government position in S.3420 convinced Norris that it must be Washington, D.C., not Wall Street, to assume leadership at Muscle Shoals. Therefore, Norris launched his own effort, proposing a government-controlled corporation.

Throughout the hearings, Norris blamed pro-Ford propaganda for the strong public support for the bill's passage. Norris' opposition to the Ford proposal earned him many enemies throughout the South, where he was burned in effigy for halting development along the Tennessee River.<sup>50</sup> Senators Charles McNary (R-OR) and Norris clashed with their Democratic colleagues, Alabamians Heflin and Underwood, in a continuous war of words.<sup>51</sup> The tensions did not abate during the following years. Heflin called Norris' 1924 Muscle Shoals



bill “Bolshevistic.”<sup>52</sup> Residents of the region were furious with Norris. However, the Teapot Dome Scandal galvanized public outrage at the apparent collusion of government and private companies to ravage national natural resources.<sup>53</sup> On July 15, 1922, the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry rejected the Ford proposal by a vote of nine to seven.<sup>54</sup> The Committee also halted Norris’ government-controlled proposal by a vote of nine to five.<sup>55</sup> Both proposals later went to the Senate floor as minority reports.

Throughout the entirety of the Muscle Shoals debate, Norris couched his arguments and opinions in his progressive civil religious attitude. Once, he remarked that government was a “religion that does not consider the conditions which exist beyond the grave but confines its consideration to happiness in this life.”<sup>56</sup> For Norris, the problem with corporate leadership in matters of national interest returned to the initial point established by Senator Harreld: altruism. The Nebraskan Senator held a deep suspicion of business motives, as shown by his intense interrogation of corporate witnesses, and believed, rightfully or not, that any “damn corporation” would exploit the government and the people in the pursuit of profit, regardless of the consequences.<sup>57</sup>

After the hearings and aware of the economic situation facing the region, Norris envisioned a vanguard role for the government in the Tennessee Valley. The 1920s would be marked by his repeated attempts to push his legislative proposals, the forerunners to the TVA, through Congress and into law. Always a renegade, Norris would take on the succession of presidents of his own political party to realize this vision.

### THE REPUBLICAN REBEL

In June 1925, George F. Milton, a reporter for *The Independent*, described the Tennessee Valley as “the Ruhr of America,” an allusion to the heartland of German industrial

strength. However, unlike its German counterpart, the Tennessee Valley languished in poverty and underdevelopment. Also, unlike the Ruhr, the Tennessee Valley, which Milton projected to be “the very heart of industrial America,” still had not resolved the political impediments to its economic salvation. The Wilson Dam in Muscle Shoals was completed that year, but the hydroelectric, fertilizer, and progressive (Norris) interests had opposing views on what to do with its electricity.<sup>58</sup> As Milton attests, the people understood that “the Tennessee River is rightly a national institution,” and Norris thought that national institutions should be controlled by their owners, the citizens of the United States.<sup>59</sup>

Throughout the 1920s, Norris waged a successful legislative war of attrition against conservative adversaries to gain public control of Muscle Shoals. Not only did Norris fight for a comprehensive, government-led effort, but he also campaigned to derail Senator Underwood’s attempts to pass legislation that merely focused on fertilizer production. Furthermore, in December 1924, Norris denounced President Calvin Coolidge’s alleged attempt to cede Muscle Shoals to the “water power trust.” He argued that the President’s intent was to deliver to Wall Street “a concession so great that it will make Teapot Dome [Scandal] look like a pinhead.”<sup>60</sup> In doing so though, Norris’ attacks spawned strange political bedfellows as Underwood the Southern Democrat allied with Coolidge the Massachusetts Republican against Norris the progressive Nebraska Republican.<sup>61</sup> For Norris, party loyalty meant nothing compared to the national imperative of economic development at Muscle Shoals. Also, to Coolidge’s chagrin, Norris had backed independent Robert “Fighting Bob” La Follette Sr. over Coolidge in the presidential election of 1924, which surely did not endear the Senator to the new President.<sup>62</sup> Underwood subsequently defended Coolidge and branded Norris as a “Populist” demagogue.<sup>63</sup> Although they were defeated, Coolidge and Underwood would exact vengeance when Norris’ own proposals reached the Senate floor soon afterward.

Norris introduced a proto-TVA bill, S.J. Res. 2147, in January 1926, but it died in committee. However, in December 1927, Norris' succeeding bill, S.J. Res. 46 or the "Morin-Norris resolution," which provided "for the completion of Dam. No. 2 at Muscle Shoals and the steam plant at Nitrate Plant No. 2," was passed by Congress. In a scathing attack, *The Washington Post* labeled the Morin-Norris bill as "communism, pure and simple" and "essentially un-American."<sup>64</sup> Unsurprisingly, Coolidge exercised a pocket veto to kill the legislation in June 1928.<sup>65</sup> In response, Norris launched a furious assault against Coolidge, threatening to break up the Republican Party and organize a third-party Farmer-Progressive ticket to challenge the Republican establishment in the year's general election.<sup>66</sup> This proved the depth of Norris' devotion to pro-farmer, progressive policies. Not only did he animadvert the President as a stooge of the "power trust," but he also discussed a full-scale rebellion against his own political party's administration and the party leadership itself. Were Norris a marginalized radical, these actions may have seemed less unusual. However, he enjoyed respect and legislative support throughout Congress, which made his defiance all the more exceptional. For Norris, the call of his civil faith was too strong to bow to Coolidge, or to any non-progressive president.

In 1928, Norris broke party ranks again and endorsed New York Democratic Governor Al Smith for the presidency.<sup>67</sup> Although Smith's "wet," Catholic background proved unpopular with Nebraskans, Norris believed that the Governor's compassion for the common people warranted his support over the free marketeering Republican challenger, Secretary Herbert Hoover. However, Hoover's victory ensured another unfriendly conservative White House for Norris. With the new president assuming office in May 1929 though, Norris tried to gain support for his government-control effort again with a new legislative bill, S.J. Res. 49. Indeed, the people of the Tennessee Valley had grown tired of the government's vacillation on the Muscle Shoals project. As Congress turned the dam and nitrate system

into a political football, the farmers and businessmen of the region wished for some form of action. Even the “communist” government-operated proposal floated by Norris, therefore, was gaining traction.

Reporting on the situation in the Deep South from Florence, Alabama, journalist Anne O’Hare McCormick wrote, “Inoculation against the idea of ‘government in business’ goes far and deep, particularly in regions like [the Tennessee Valley], where government does not fulfill even the humblest citizen’s ideal of efficiency or honesty.”<sup>68</sup> As the woe of the Great Depression deepened, the people of the Tennessee Valley looked to Washington, D.C. for a “second reconstruction.” Recording the local reaction to the new legislation, McCormick observed, “A few days after the second passage of the Norris resolution declaring that Muscle Shoals shall be owned and operated by the government, the valley is once more stirred by the hope of action as by a fresh wind from the north.”<sup>69</sup> With broad legislative support, Norris’ bill passed Congress and headed down Pennsylvania Avenue to Hoover’s desk.<sup>70</sup>

Like his Republican predecessor, President Hoover, standing adamant against federal control, vetoed the bill. The President commented that opposition to Norris’ agenda “appears to be cause for denunciation as being in league with the power companies.”<sup>71</sup> A few days prior, Norris had alleged that the power trust sought to manipulate the U.S. government and appropriate her resources, hinting that Hoover was caught in its corporate enchantment. Lambasting the utilities, Norris stated, “What is the raw material of this monopoly? It is the rivers and the brooks that flow from the mountains to the sea. Is it not true that the people own these natural resources?”<sup>72</sup> Not only did Norris believe that the power trust exerted undue monopolistic influence, but he also felt that it could coerce the media to do its bidding. When asked for a comparative example of a private versus public system, Norris usually referred to the Canadian public versus American private prices along the

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Niagara River. However, analyzing Ontario Hydro, journalist Thomas Woodlock of *The Wall Street Journal* excoriated public-operated power in a November 1930 article alleging that private plants were more economical than public ones.<sup>73</sup> The ferocity of journalistic opposition to government-led Tennessee Valley proposals tended to lend some credence to the Senator's statements that corporate power interests were colluding with the media to halt public expansions.

Hoover's veto infuriated Southern Democrats and Midwestern Progressives who stood against the pro-Hoover Northeastern Republicans. The Senate attempted an override, but fell six votes short of the two-thirds majority needed to do so with forty-nine votes for and thirty-four votes against.<sup>74</sup> Authoring a long, detailed explanation for his veto, Hoover suggested that Alabama and Tennessee could collaborate to develop the Tennessee Valley. He did, however, voice support for the construction of the Cove Creek (later Norris) Dam on the Clinch River for flood regulation.<sup>75</sup> Hoover felt that he needed



Construction of Cove Creek Dam, later renamed Norris Dam  
in honor of Senator George W. Norris



to delineate between the appropriate realms of government and private operations. In his justification, the President remarked, “I hesitate to contemplate the future of our institutions, of our government and of our country if the preoccupation of its officials is to be no longer the promotion of justice and equal opportunity, but is to be devoted to barter in the markets. That is not liberalism, it is degeneration.”<sup>76</sup>

Though businessmen and conservatives viewed Norris’ Muscle Shoals proposals as “degeneration,” the winds of political change were blowing across the United States. The serious economic crisis was plunging millions into poverty. In particular, the rural poor faced the brunt of the Great Depression, a calamity widely pinned to the excessive greed and speculation of Wall Street financiers. As demands for government assistance increased, allegations of socialistic planning decreased. Furthermore, the need for basic necessities, which increasingly included the provision of electricity, aligned with the progressive ethos that in matters of national interest, the moral imperative of the ends justified the unilateralism of the means. Seeing it as a modern necessity, Norris viewed electricity as “the breath of life of the machine age” and “essential to human activity.”<sup>77</sup> Economic Liberals such as Hoover, Coolidge, and later, Wendell Willkie saw electric power as a force of progress, granted to the country through the vibrancy of American capitalism and competition. Norris saw power as tantamount to a civil right.

### PROGRESSIVISM EMPOWERED

Fresh off his victory over President Herbert Hoover in the presidential election of 1932, President-Elect Franklin D. Roosevelt travelled to Alabama in January 1933 to tour Muscle Shoals. He delivered an informal speech on January 21 in Montgomery to a crowd that included the Governor of Alabama. Roosevelt fused reverence for Alabama’s past with his progressive vision for the country. His message was clear. Standing in the

“birthplace of the Confederacy,” Roosevelt outlined a bold future for the stagnating, suffering South, painting a future of “better opportunities and better places for living for millions” of people through “planning.”<sup>78</sup>

As President Roosevelt prepared to deliver a furious volley of ambitious New Deal legislation in the spring of 1933 after his inauguration, Norris worked to bring his dream to fruition. Collaborating with Representative Lister Hill (D-AL) in the House of Representatives, Norris developed S.J. 1272, known as the Tennessee Valley Authority Act of 1933. According to S.J. 1272, the TVA was to be governed by a board of commissioners selected by presidential appointment. In addition to ordering the operation of experimental plants and laboratories for fertilizer production, the bill authorized the TVA to “produce, distribute, and sell electric power.”<sup>79</sup> A *New York Times* article on the bill captured the novelty and revolutionary nature of the TVA proposal:

The 1933 edition of the Norris bill for the development of Muscle Shoals follows the original model, with the [TVA] tacked on. Cheap fertilizer for the farmer, cheap light and power for the housewife. They are to be sought by putting government, directly, into the fertilizer and utility business, on almost a cosmic scale. The power plants are to be made a weapon in the war on the ‘Power Trust.’<sup>80</sup>

Norris, who had faced recalcitrant Republican opposition during the 1920s, only received support from Roosevelt, whom Norris had supported in the presidential election of 1932. In April and May 1933, President Roosevelt worked to speed the TVA bill to passage.<sup>81</sup> In a speech to Congress, Roosevelt spoke in the language of the progressive civil religion of infrastructure, calling for the “return to the spirit and vision of the pioneer” through government “planning.” He preached that it was time

for the United States to create “a corporation clothed with the power of Government...for the general social and economic welfare of the Nation.”<sup>82</sup> Where there was no hope, government would provide. Where there was no altruism, government would provide. The message from Roosevelt to an audience of millions of unemployed workers and tenant farmers, therefore, evoked the message that the government was there and ready to provide for and safeguard its constituents.

On May 4, 1933, the TVA bill passed for the seventh and final time with a massive congressional majority. The House versions were less aggressive than Norris’ proposal, giving more room for government partnerships with private firms. The Nebraskan’s bill envisioned a TVA vertically integrated to master the river, derive electricity from dams, and then electrify the countryside. As usual, Norris garnered more Democratic than Republican support for his agenda.<sup>83</sup> His image transformed as he brought his legislative power to bear for the President. Roosevelt needed a torchbearer in the Senate and Norris was a true believer in the New Deal. For Norris, the Roosevelt revolution was an opportunity to restore the power of the people and democratize the progress that conservatives and big businesses thought must come from free enterprise. The TVA was a landmark change. While progressives had sought to regulate corporate greed and bust trusts for decades, progressive government would now replace business in the pursuit of national progress. Thus, Norris the “son of the wild jackass” was now Norris the New Dealer.<sup>84</sup>

Not all citizens and politicians shared the President’s enthusiasm for the TVA or for the unprecedented breadth of Norris’ proposal. An article in *The New York Times* from April 1933 warned that the TVA should seek to develop the region in conjunction with existing private utilities. Concerned Norris’ proposal was too radical, the article suggested that the House versions provided a more reasonable compromise and consideration of the various interests with stakes in the Tennessee Valley business:

If the Government is to embark on this venture at all, it is earnestly to be hoped that these saving clauses [from the House] will be retained in the bill, and an opportunity thus afforded the new Tennessee Valley Authority to work out its grandiose plans in cooperation with the utilities, rather than in cutthroat competition with them.<sup>85</sup>

Despite the article's hope for "cooperation," however, the relationship between the TVA and the private utilities would be defined by "cutthroat competition." In fact, the seriousness of the competition dragged the TVA's attention from dam-building to the U.S. Supreme Court. As the TVA's mandate expanded, either through statute, precedent, or unilateral decision-making, the private utilities' propensity and ability to cooperate diminished, souring and hardening into indignant animosity. Fighting the full force of the Roosevelt administration would prove a herculean feat, but as soon as the TVA started to act, opposition coalesced. Nevertheless, on June 16, 1933, less than a month after President Roosevelt signed the compromise bill, the Tennessee Valley Authority initiated operations. The federal government was officially in the power business.<sup>86</sup>

### THE TRIUMPH OF THE TENNESSEE VALLEY AUTHORITY

Norris' crusade to create the TVA was the signature campaign of the progressive civil religion of the 1930s. Distrustful of corporations, skeptical of state cooperation, and concerned for many of the impoverished farmers of rural Tennessee and Alabama, the Nebraska Senator laced his statements and speeches with the language of progressivism. It was the faith of the Age of Infrastructure. No longer content to check the excesses and injustices of the free market, Norris and his colleagues let government lead the way through planning.

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The spirit of the progressive civil religion of infrastructure went beyond the legislative birth of the TVA and Norris' determined efforts—it permeated the form and function of the TVA as it reengineered southern Appalachia.

President Roosevelt appointed a three-man Board of Directors—David Lilienthal, Arthur Morgan, and Harcourt Morgan—to manage the TVA and oversee its ambitious agenda. The TVA's plans for the region were bold. By the fall of 1944, nine main river dams were completed and generated electricity along the course of the Tennessee River from Fort Loudoun Dam to Kentucky Dam, 628 miles downstream. Incorporating the two existing dams on the Tennessee River, Wilson and Hales Bar, the TVA built the remainder of the main river dams as well as a number of fossil fuel power plants, a plethora of bridges, and numerous smaller electricity-generating and storage dams along the river's tributaries.<sup>87</sup> The TVA tamed the river through the creation of massive reservoirs covering thousands of acres and enabled navigation from Knoxville to the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>88</sup> Norris Dam, renamed in honor of the Senator, dammed the Clinch River, a tributary of the Tennessee River northeast of Knoxville. Formerly known as the Cove Creek Dam, the Norris Dam was the first line of defense against damaging floods which devastated the Tennessee Valley, the Ohio Valley, and down to the Mississippi River. Apart from local destruction, frequent flooding degraded the already-depleted soil of the Tennessee Valley.

Part of the TVA's Norris Dam project included the construction of a local settlement, also called Norris. The village, a master-planned community, included communal amenities and modern conveniences. Unlike many works camps of the Great Depression, Norris was designed as a permanent community—the TVA's model community.<sup>89</sup> Even religious life was reformulated as a modern, ecumenical civil exercise. For example, the secular public school was the designated place of worship for the inhabitants of the village. While the village's small size and rural



milieu influenced the lack of appropriate facilities, the image of a unified community engaging in a religious exercise fell in-line with the vision of the progressive civil religion of infrastructure. Individual impediments to unity were to be overcome. Every prayer was a civil communion, and every concrete pour was alms for a needy nation. This civil ecumenicalism produced strident critics in the 1930s South. For example, responding to TVA regulations on church construction, a local southern governor admitted that he did not appreciate Norris' progressive ecumenicalism, identifying such practices with "communism."<sup>90</sup> But the TVA did not build a "godless town" in Norris, Tennessee; it built a new universal devotion—the religion of communitarian progress in which all citizens could share material salvation on Earth. In his autobiography, Senator Norris admitted, "religious prejudice is the most deeply imbued prejudice that exists in the human heart."<sup>91</sup> Thus, the TVA brought the totality of life within the public sphere, engineering egalitarianism through the progressive civil religion of infrastructure.

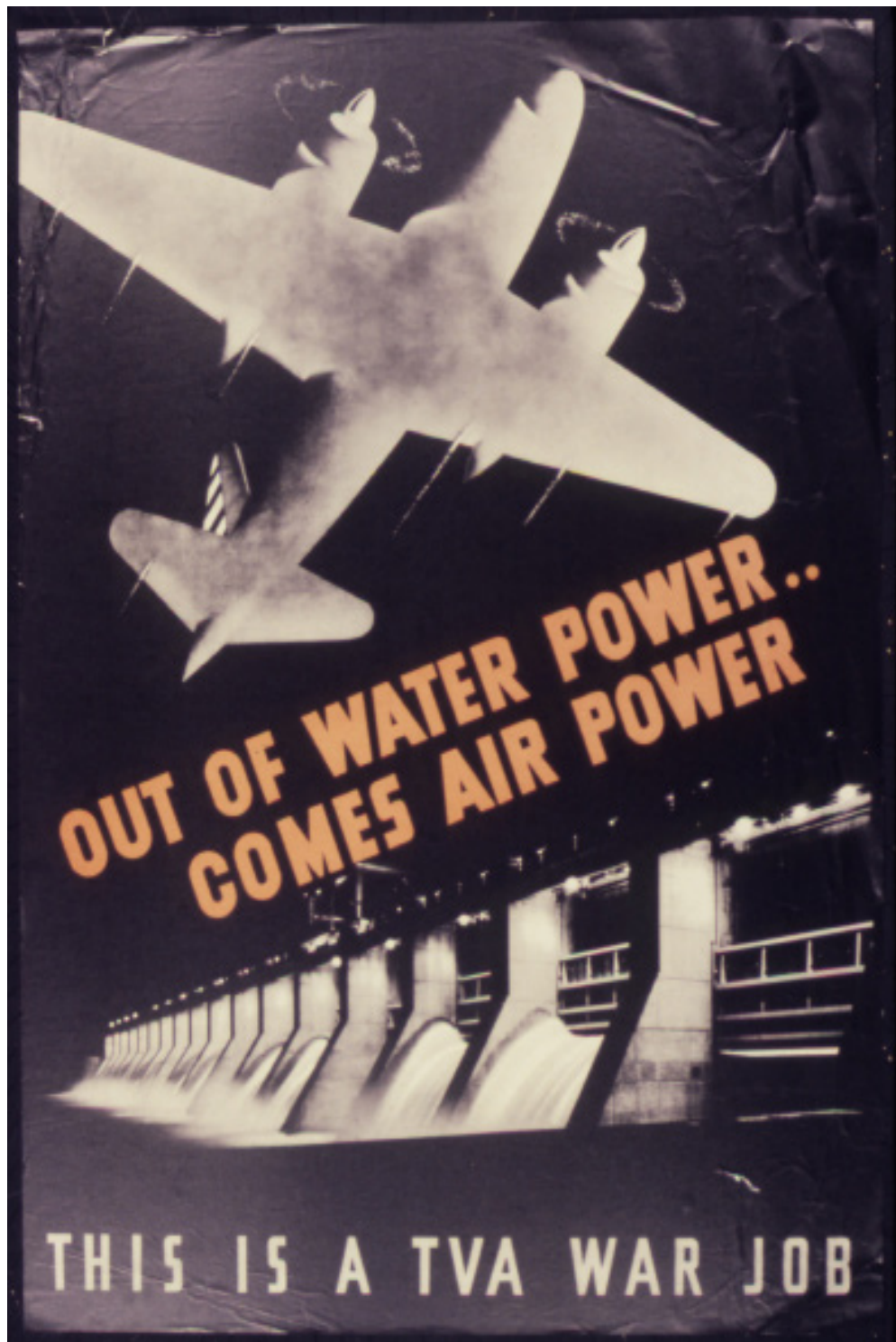
Much of the TVA's physical infrastructure also embodied the progressive civil religious ideals of a perfectible society. To link Knoxville to the dam and the village, the TVA built a parkway praised by national critics for its fusion of natural beauty with functionality.<sup>92</sup> Under the TVA, a public work was more than a mere concrete highway or a hydroelectric dam. Aesthetic quality and permanence were key features, designed to maximize the experience and welfare of the people. In every dam's control room, the words "Built for the People of the United States" were emblazoned in steely letters for all to see. Progressives of the past had sought to cordon off expanses of American wilderness from negative human interference—conserving in the face of capitalist progress. Progressives of the Age of Infrastructure, however, sought to modify the world to suit their design for the people—engineering the alternative to capitalist progress. The architectural style of the dams and other TVA facilities epitomized the forceful modernity that accompanied

this governing philosophy. A mixture of brutalism, elegance, and industrial might defined the TVA dams along the Tennessee River and its tributaries. Art deco motifs graced turbine halls and bold lines defined the concrete hulks slicing into the verdant hills of East Tennessee.

The TVA's quantitative contributions were as impressive as its buildings. By 1938, the TVA employed 13,000 men and women.<sup>93</sup> By 1941, before the completion of the last several dams, the TVA had 2,000,000 kilowatts of capacity and it had carved out a 650-mile navigation channel along the sinuous Tennessee River. Scholars estimated that by the end of 1943, nearly \$722 million government dollars had been invested in navigation, flood control, and power projects for the TVA, amounting to an enormous sum. Millions of southerners drew cheap power from the TVA grid through municipal and community local distributors. Thousands more enjoyed the parks, lakes, and recreational facilities built by the TVA along the winding course of the river.<sup>94</sup> The TVA was more than a development agency. It became the engine for the "arsenal of democracy."

At one point during the Second World War, the TVA employed 42,000 workers. Its dams provided the energy for aluminum production, vital for the United States' air forces. It also supplied power to a mysterious government project at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where Manhattan Project engineers harnessed the TVA's vast electrical resources to enrich uranium for the United States' first atomic weapons.<sup>95</sup> The United States government used its investment in the TVA, along with its hydroelectric projects along the Columbia River in the Pacific Northwest, to beat ploughshares into swords and defeat fascism. Writing in 1958, author John Kyle reflected on the successes of the TVA's new society. Describing its developmental achievements and international fame, Kyle explained, "To many people the world over, the Tennessee Valley Authority represents the highest achievement of American democracy."<sup>96</sup>

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Propoganda Poster from the Second World War  
Flaunting the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Tennessee Valley Authority

TENNESSEE VALLEY AUTHORITY IN TURMOIL

The TVA's flurry of construction did not sate Norris' appetite for progressive development. He set his sights on larger quarry: the Mississippi River Valley. In December 1935, Norris, extrapolating from a former plan for a "Missouri Valley Authority," sought to cover half the country under the aegis of a gargantuan government corporation.<sup>97</sup> By 1937, his dreams were even more expansive. Delivering a statement at the White House Executive Office, Norris declared that "he was planning to introduce a bill authorizing creation of an agency to build throughout the country a system of flood control and power plants similar to the Tennessee Valley Authority."<sup>98</sup> Unfortunately for Senator Norris though, his bill and his dream of a national TVA-esque agency died in the Senate.<sup>99</sup> Still, this disappointment would prove the least of his worries. The enemies of the progressive civil religion of infrastructure were coalescing.

Throughout the 1930s, private system after private system sold out to the local municipalities and to the TVA—for example, Tennessee Public Service Co., Tennessee Light & Power Co., West Tennessee Power & Light Co., and Tennessee Electric Power Co. all sold off operations to the TVA.<sup>100</sup> While these acquisitions expanded the TVA's ability to reach underserved populations, its imperious behavior provoked intense backlash from utility companies. The adoption of the TVA model in other states was also faltering. Plans for a New York TVA-esque agency along the St. Lawrence River were derailed by inadequate funding measures and lack of congressional support.<sup>101</sup> Meanwhile, Norris' former secretary and Comptroller General J.R. McCarl had "sharply questioned some of [the] TVA's purchasing methods." On the defensive, therefore, the Nebraska Senator played his favorite political card by accusing McCarl of allegiances to the "power-trust."<sup>102</sup>

Norris, responding to these problems and other constant challenges to the TVA's rather limited statutory authority,

proposed a bill to grant the TVA the explicit prerogative to “buy up private power facilities for resale to communities wanting a public power source.”<sup>103</sup> His legislation also sought to double the TVA’s bond issuing capacity.<sup>104</sup> The TVA leadership attempted to secure this statutory authorization for an expansion to TVA powers in the spring of 1935. But, to its frustration, the TVA Board found the House Military Affairs Committee, the committee overseeing the TVA, to be less than compliant with their wishes. The Committee tabled the House version of Norris’ bill, supported by original TVA sponsor and committee chairman John Jackson McSwain (D-SC).<sup>105</sup>

As the dams rose on the Tennessee River, the nation’s attention and criticism turned to the TVA. In 1936, however, 120,000 high school debate students answered the question: “Resolved, that all electric utilities should be governmentally owned.” Herbert Corey, the journalist covering the event, made no secret of his position on that matter, although he wrapped his bias in a thin veil of manufactured impartiality: “public ownership as a policy has failed in the Americas. It might be a necessity in the backward European countries where the people have lacked the intelligence and the enterprise on which industrial advancement is based.”<sup>106</sup> The rampant bias on both sides of the TVA issue reflected how deeply ingrained the public versus private power ownership issue was in the American political consciousness of the 1930s.

Businessmen involved in the coal business were also concerned by the TVA’s activities. Senator Norris, unreserved in his criticism of capitalist complaints, unleashed his usual indictments that businessmen were interfering in the national pilgrimage to public power. During the original struggle for the TVA’s passage, John L. Lewis, a coal executive, became one of Norris’ targets. The Senator alleged, “Mr. Lewis’ attitude simply demonstrated that any man who stands in the way of human progress and seeks to prevent the use of technological improvements is standing in his own way and blocking his



own progress.” Norris did not elaborate on who was granted the power to define “human progress.” Throughout the Age of Infrastructure, Norris and his compatriots were completely convinced that their opinions were irreproachably correct and moral. Then, they married this unwavering confidence with technocratic implementation. Victory, not compromise, was the goal. Understandably, this recalcitrant orthodoxy generated problems. The opposition to the TVA was not limited to errant journalists soapboxing through public interest pieces or corporate representatives. A serious and determined resistance to the TVA’s encroachment emerged. Nevertheless, one of the TVA’s greatest challenges was endogenous. Something was rotten in Knoxville.

The TVA’s triumvirate leadership began to disintegrate. The problems had begun shortly after the foundation of the TVA in 1933, though it took several years for the severity of the dissention to permeate the public sphere. Chairman Arthur Morgan clashed with his fellow board members David Lilienthal and Harcourt Morgan over significant executive decisions. What had been a private struggle, especially between Chairman Morgan and Lilienthal, devolved into a public rhetorical brawl when Chairman Morgan levied indictments of mismanagement and negligence against Lilienthal. For example, Chairman Morgan accused Lilienthal of mishandling the negotiations with Alcoa over the Fontana Dam in North Carolina. Still, this was only one case in a succession of outlandish accusations in which Chairman Morgan publically directed towards Lilienthal. After the Chairman interfered unreasonably in another spat known as the Berry marble issue, Lilienthal and Harcourt Morgan wrote to President Roosevelt requesting that Arthur Morgan resign.<sup>107</sup> However, Roosevelt, the only significant check on the Chairman’s power, did nothing.

Eventually, Arthur Morgan forced the President’s hand. After demanding a congressional investigation into the activities of the other board members and suspicious TVA actions, Roosevelt sacked Chairman Morgan in March 1938.

The defamation continued during the subsequent investigation. Lilienthal and Harcourt Morgan alleged that Arthur Morgan had tried to “sabotage” the TVA as an agent of the power trust.<sup>108</sup> Arthur Morgan shot back, making a series of charges including “mismanagement of the power program, conspiracy, and subservience to...special interests.”<sup>109</sup> Throughout the summer of 1938, Lilienthal parried attacks from Arthur Morgan and the press, referring to the Chairman as “reckless, unreliable, and erratic.”<sup>110</sup>

The “TVA Scandal” wrought havoc, distracting from the completion of TVA priorities and fueling the agency’s critics. Arthur Morgan launched a messy lawsuit only to be defeated in the courts, further sullyng his already-tainted image. Although the scandal abated, the series of events tarnished the TVA’s administrative record. Confidence in the governance of appointed experts, thought to be immune to the petty politicking of Congress and the underhanded tactics of the business elites, was shaken. The Morgan crisis reminded Norris and the radical New Dealers of an unpleasant reality. Many men, not just Henry Ford, were driven by avarice and a lust for the aggregation of power. Business, especially in the unregulated 1920s, was bluntly motivated by profit, much to Norris’ disgust. However, despite what Norris would have liked to have thought, government was no monolith of unending altruism. It, like business, was composed of men who sought to exercise a vision and the means to power.

The strife between Arthur Morgan and his two comrades illustrated how personal and petty concerns could derail the holy project of the TVA. As the agency made great strides in raising dams along the rivers and stringing transmission lines along country roads, the TVA was bogged down in politics and hearings, eventually necessitating intervention from the President. Norris had handed the Board an immense amount of institutional power backed by the full faith and credit of the United States. The Morgan crisis proved that although the TVA

could reshape the countryside to suit man's desires, it could not, even with its noble mandate, reshape those desires. It also demonstrated that the TVA, with its unusually long nine-year appointments for Board members, was as corruptible as any other government institution.

### WENDELL WILLKIE'S WAR

Chairman Arthur Morgan, though troublesome, was not the greatest foe the TVA faced during the 1930s. The TVA's rapid expansion had generated enemies, and the power utilities grew increasingly concerned, especially as Norris proposed ever-bolder plans for a nationwide TVA-esque agency that would replace private power corporations. Throughout its early years, the TVA interacted with Commonwealth & Southern Corporation (C&S), a major U.S. utility holding company, and its dynamic, articulate president, Wendell Willkie. Concerned by government's entry into the electricity market, Willkie proved more than a match for Lilienthal in Knoxville and Norris in Washington, D.C. as they fought over the future of energy in the United States. Willkie challenged the fullest expression of the progressive civil religion of infrastructure, seeking to check the excesses of the New Deal to preserve the competitive system that he and others felt was so central to the United States' economic success and culture of individual liberty.

In modern times, Wendell Willkie is best remembered as the Republican challenger to Roosevelt in the presidential election of 1940. That election was notable because Roosevelt broke with the Washingtonian tradition and marched towards an unprecedented third term in office with a healthy lead in votes. However, Willkie was no stooge of the Republican establishment, nor was he a conservative purist. He was a dynamic, eloquent candidate and the most potent foe of the TVA. Willkie was no politician either; he was hardly even a Republican, having been a Democrat until 1939. He was a business executive, trained as an

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Wendell Willkie,  
President of Commonwealth  
& Southern Corporation

attorney, and eminently successful at his work. Promoted from counsel to president of the influential C&S in 1933, Willkie was positioned to take control of the company just as the TVA began organizing. More specifically, Willkie assumed authority when the TVA was poised to develop electricity systems in a region where the C&S already had a significant subsidiary presence.

Ironically, Willkie, a registered Democrat at the time and a regular attendee of national party conventions, became the champion of the anti-TVA movement. He stood against a Republican, Senator Norris, who stridently backed every New Deal proposal and fought for the TVA on every occasion.<sup>111</sup> Norris' progressive faith, which previously had confounded partisanship, and Willkie's defense of economic liberty, made for strange alliances. Over the course of the 1930s, Willkie would force Norris to shield the TVA, at the public podium and in the Capitol. The Nebraskan had fought for more than decade to tame the Tennessee River for the people of the United States. Now, he would have to fight to keep it.

The TVA entered negotiations with C&S in 1933 to discuss a *modus vivendi*. In January 1934, C&S and the TVA reached a settlement in which the TVA agreed not to enter certain areas nor take C&S customers until a few months after the completion of the Norris Dam. Much to the consternation of C&S, the TVA immediately sped up construction of the dam. Meanwhile, the TVA also strung transmission lines around cities currently served by utility companies and offered economic incentives for those municipalities to switch service to TVA power.<sup>112</sup> Willkie strongly opposed the double standards which he felt were applied to the TVA. He argued that if the TVA was subjected to the same “requirements binding private utilities,” it could not survive in the marketplace. Beyond general complaints of unfairness, Willkie’s primary concern was the TVA’s creeping mandate. Congress tried to set limits on the scope of its powers in the 1935 bills through amendments in the appropriations package. However, the New Deal legislators had intervened, stripping out provisions that would have required audits, prohibited the sale of surplus power under cost, and prevented the duplication of transmission lines.<sup>113</sup> Willkie, therefore, delivered a forceful condemnation of this interference.<sup>114</sup>

In 1935, Willkie railed against the TVA “yardstick” concept, a means to test the fairness of electricity rates, and other TVA “frantic activity” that he viewed as designed to erode private utilities through unfair practices.<sup>115</sup> President Roosevelt had first invoked the “yardstick” concept during his campaign in the presidential election of 1932 as a means through which the TVA could check the ability of private operators to raise prices, similar to the discussions on rates that were seen in the Muscle Shoals hearings in 1922.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, the “yardstick” concept was not included in the original TVA legislation, which troubled Willkie and other private operators. They felt that the TVA, afforded government advantages, would be a privileged competitor that would gradually encroach on their businesses. This was a correct assumption. Additionally, Willkie assumed that the trend of



subsidizing consumers “at the expense of taxpayers” through government intervention would, if not restrained, threaten the entirety of the U.S. utility market.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, many private operators believed that the “yardstick” concept was less of a means of protecting consumers and more of a ploy to bludgeon control of power systems into government hands. To be sure, Roosevelt admitted in 1934 that “where the private interest and this public interest conflict, the public interest must prevail.”<sup>118</sup> Electric power had become the cynosure of debate over the TVA.

Corporate apprehensions about the growth of the TVA’s mandate and intentions were substantiated by the difference between the focus of the authorizing legislation—the Tennessee Valley Authority Act of 1933—which provided for the precedent-supported government regulation of rivers for navigation and flood control, and the apparent driving focus of the TVA, supplanting private power utilities. Electric power generation and transmission had been secondary elements of an April 1933 Senate Committee report for the TVA bill. The clear intention of the bill was for flood control and navigation in the Tennessee Valley as well as the production of fertilizers at Muscle Shoals. In fact, the report only mentions electric power in Clause Five.<sup>119</sup> When one reflects upon the original intent of the National Defense Act of 1916, the scope of the transformation is even broader. Muscle Shoals began as an effort to produce critical nitrate for U.S. farmers and for the war effort during the First World War. The electric power was a means to produce that nitrate. By 1933, however, the project had evolved into a federal power scheme. This exercise of federal prerogative was supported with little if any precedent.

Willkie blamed overzealous New Dealers for the TVA’s alleged overreaching. He released a statement in January 1938 alleging that the TVA was as much an effort to neuter the private utility industry as it was to build infrastructure for the impoverished people of the Tennessee Valley:

There was no utility problem in the Tennessee Valley until the Federal Government created it. As soon as the Tennessee Valley Authority Act was passed in June 1933, however, the Federal Government began to flood the Tennessee Valley with both money and propaganda on behalf of the government power projects. The government built dams, power plants, and transmission lines.<sup>120</sup>

Willkie, hoping to reach a workable arrangement with the TVA that protected the core interests of C&S, had been willing to negotiate with Lilienthal in the early days of TVA activities. As political scientist C. Herman Pritchett notes, “Several times during this period[,] Willkie, president of Commonwealth & Southern, met with Lilienthal, power director of the T.V.A., and presented suggestions for a division of areas between the two agencies.”<sup>121</sup> However, Lilienthal was unwilling to negotiate, believing that the accommodation of the private power interests was “contrary to the provisions of the T.V.A. statute.”<sup>122</sup> Whether demanding hard territorial limits on TVA activities from Roosevelt, litigating against the TVA over competition issues, or speaking to the American people with “a fluency and eloquence,” Willkie defended the principles of American free enterprise against the power of the popular progressive civil religion.<sup>123</sup> Willkie’s national prominence opened his path to challenge Roosevelt in the presidential election of 1940, by which time he finally changed his registration to Republican.

Willkie’s war and the TVA’s internal challenges tempered the scope of Norris’ ambitions for government-operated utilities. Willkie reminded the American people that while the government could advance the public good, it could also advance it beyond appropriate, constitutional boundaries. The political intransigence of the Muscle Shoals project in the 1920s suffocated development in the Tennessee Valley. For the farmers

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of Alabama and Tennessee, Congress moved too slowly. The TVA marched forward at a breakneck pace, erecting dams and electrifying counties. For some, the TVA was moving too quickly and without consideration for the consequences of its actions.

Some critics of Norris' proposals had warned of creeping socialism or bureaucratic planners run amok. Vehement opposition to government operations in the Tennessee Valley only served to prove the progressives' point—the profit motive had corrupted every echelon of society. Willkie's strategic criticisms and trust-building efforts were far more constructive. He served as a necessary and natural check on the TVA. When it erred, Willkie pointed it out. When it ran roughshod over business interests, he illuminated the transgressions and offered proposals. Willkie tempered the excesses of the progressive civil religion of infrastructure. His efforts established a tenable middle ground between Norris' dreams of the total nationalization of utilities and the laissez-faire economics that epitomized the former Coolidge administration. Through that mediation, the nation achieved a workable coexistence between government-led progress and individual-led progress. The TVA stands as a unique institution in the United States. Norris failed to realize his dream of public power nationwide. However, the TVA survived the 1930s, remaining as a robust experiment that provided cheap power and good jobs to the people of the Tennessee Valley.

### THE AGE OF INFRASTRUCTURE

The Age of Infrastructure witnessed some of the greatest public achievements in the United States. The TVA brought power to the people, bringing a vision of hope to one of the country's poorest regions. It proved that government would not forget the most vulnerable Americans. Its successes represented the epitome of Norris' populist progressivism—government, as a vanguard, would build a better society through the provision of economic empowerment. The TVA was a

national effort, transcending the sectionalism of pettier politics. Its foremost advocates included a plutocratic president from the Hudson River Valley and an agrarian populist senator from the Great Plains. For Norris, the United States was at its best when it led by example. This informed his isolationist tendencies and his commitment to communitarian modernism. Writing in 1944, Norris expressed a hope for a brave, new future of American politics:

But so long as an unselfish leadership remains for [the American people's] guidance—a leadership untainted by corrupting personal ambition—a leadership inspired by the simple strength that oozes from the soil and the humble ranks of the poor—and at time is enriched and fortified enormously by the support and voice of those who wear purple robes of great wealth—I am sure America can continue to be the bright beacon toward which the eyes of the world's oppressed and downtrodden will turn for inspiration and hope.<sup>124</sup>

The greatest tragedy of Norris' career was the dearth of Americans who could provide the “unselfish leadership” he desired. The destructive squabbling of the TVA triumvirs proved that even the people's technocracy was susceptible to the baser demons of human nature.

The TVA's troubles paled compared to exploitations of progressivism by men of truly unbridled “personal ambition.” For them, the ends always justified the means and the Age of Infrastructure created unparalleled methods for the materialization of their vision. Under a banner of social reform and modernity, city planner Robert Moses, another great builder of public works, obtained unprecedented and unchecked power in New York. As he built an administrative empire, he cultivated and greedily protected his autonomous authority from any encroachment. Exploiting the ascendancy of public investment

in infrastructure and justifying his actions under the broad umbrella of societal progress, Moses bludgeoned any opponent who sought, like Norris' Willkie, to moderate his activities. With imperious arrogance, Moses once remarked, "There are people who like things as they are... They cannot be permitted to stand in the way of progress."<sup>125</sup> As he flattened poor and minority neighborhoods to build titanic highways, Moses meant this statement in its most literal sense. Either the people would move or he would move them.

The TVA's failings and Robert Moses' autocracy revealed the dangers inherent to the progressive civil religion of infrastructure.<sup>126</sup> Intention, regardless of its moral rationalization, did not guarantee purely altruistic governance. The overarching theme of this political faith was a profound confidence, bordering on arrogance, that the progressive powerbrokers knew what was best for the people. Unwavering faith in the righteousness of one's opinions translated into wholesale, uncompromising implementation and a flawed belief that one could reengineer society to conform to their idea of a democratic utopia. Institutions of merit without checks became the realms of the bureaucratic oligarchy.

In forming the model of the United States' constitutional representative republic, James Madison recognized that government would need to check private ambitions for the safety of the body politic. Progressives, including Woodrow Wilson, thought this cautious conservative form of government obsolete for the modern age. Norris did worry about the ambitions of men such as Henry Ford or the "power trusters," but he equated the threat with unbridled industrial capitalism, not an overzealous government. Norris failed to recognize how his own works, however well-intentioned, created new, and often thoroughly undemocratic, avenues for the individual pursuit of power at the public's expense. Sadly for this "gentle knight of American democracy," his endless compassion for the plight of the poor was tainted by his own naïveté.<sup>127</sup>



## The Age of Infrastructure

Despite these setbacks, Norris' contributions to building American democracy were monumental. During the 1920s, his national perspective and resolute integrity reinforced the people's faith in their government in an era of regionalism and endless scandals. In the 1930s, his ideology formed the rock upon which the New Deal was formed. Working hand-in-hand with President Roosevelt, Norris used an economic crisis to direct Americans' attention to people whose Great Depression began decades earlier through a systematic pattern of neglect, underinvestment, and environmental degradation. Through his determination, Norris took a weapon of war, the Muscle Shoals project, and converted it into an instrument for the public welfare. Fittingly, the TVA would work to protect American democracy through a renewal of equality and its defense against the forces of fascism. Senator Norris' strain of progressivism shunned individualism while embracing communitarianism. It substantiated massive increases in federal authority while illuminating the darkest of valleys. The TVA was the public church for a new civil religion: a nationalist, equalitarian, and materialist crusade for the betterment of the people. Norris' sermon was that the government's responsibility was the promotion of "happiness in this life" for all people, nationwide. His mission lives on in the rivers he mastered, the farms he electrified, and the futures he "Built for the People of the United States."

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*Note: All newspapers are drawn from ProQuest Historical Newspapers or American Periodicals databases.*

<sup>1</sup> George W. Norris, *Fighting Liberal* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1945), 402.

<sup>2</sup> The term “faith” is used because it couches Senator Norris’ language about his ideology in highly-religious terminology. Furthermore, “faith” emphasizes how Norris’ ideological and infrastructural agenda was heavily predicated upon an almost spiritual devotion to progressive principles.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Overlack, “The Force of Circumstance: Graf Spee’s Options for the East Asian Cruiser Squadron in 1914,” *The Journal of Military History* 60, no. 4 (October 1996), 657-682.

<sup>4</sup> R.A.F. Penrose Jr., “The Nitrate Deposits of Chile,” *The Journal of Geology* 18, no. 1 (January-February 1910), 1.

<sup>5</sup> “Nitrate Making in Germany Is Well Advanced: Nation’s Chemists Have Made Rapid Strides in Seeking Process for Manufacture of Fertilizer—United States’ Plans,” *Christian Science Monitor* August 10, 1916, 11.

<sup>6</sup> “A Lesson from Germany: She Has Developed Her Water Power and Used It to Obtain Nitrates from the Air,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 1915, 19.

<sup>7</sup> “For Air-Made Nitrates: Chief of Ordnance Says Government Should Prepare for Emergency,” *Washington Post*, December 28, 1915, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew L. Downs, *Transforming the South: Federal Development in the Tennessee Valley, 1915-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), 14.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Congress, 64th Congress, Session I, Chapter 134, “An Act for making further and more effectual provision for the national defense, and for other purposes,” June 3, 1916, Section 124, 215.

<sup>10</sup> Downs, *Transforming the South*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Evans, “Radicals of the Senate Are Absorbed by the New Deal: ‘Sons of Wild Jackass’ Become ‘Yes Men,’” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 11, 1935, D6.

<sup>14</sup> “Death Takes Former U.S. Sen. George W. Norris: Veteran of 40 Years in Congress ‘Fathered’ T.V.A. and Sponsored Lame Duck Amendment,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 1944, 2. The quote “uncompromising foe of special privilege” is drawn from President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s remarks upon hearing of the passing of Senator Norris.

<sup>15</sup> George W. Norris was instrumental in the establishment of Nebraska’s unicameral legislature.

<sup>16</sup> Norris, *Fighting Liberal*, 405.

<sup>17</sup> Norman L. Zucker, *George W. Norris: Gentle Knight of American Democracy*

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<sup>18</sup> Norris, *Fighting Liberal*, 111.

<sup>19</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 606.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 632.

<sup>21</sup> Zucker, *George W. Norris*, 10.

<sup>22</sup> “Norris to Fight Penrose: Nebraska Republican Going to Pennsylvania to Aid Pinchot,” *New York Times*, October 20, 1914, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Zucker, *George W. Norris*, 115.

<sup>24</sup> Norris, *Fighting Liberal*, 191.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>26</sup> Norris, *Fighting Liberal*, 202; “Norris Running Behind: Nebraska Senator Apparently Defeated—So Is Bryan’s Brother,” *New York Times*, August 21, 1918, 5.

<sup>27</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, “Progressivism and Imperialism: The Progressive Movement and American Foreign Policy, 1898-1916,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 39, no. 3 (December 1952), 500-501.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Muscle Shoals: Hearings before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry: Part One*, 67th Congress, 2nd session, February 16, April 10, April 12, and April 13, 1922. “To provide for the manufacture of explosives for the use of the army and navy, to provide for the manufacture of fertilizer for agricultural purposes, to incorporate the Federal Chemical Corporation, and for other purposes; and on the Henry Ford Muscle Shoals offer; offer made by the Alabama Power Co., proposing to complete Wilson Dam; officer of Frederick E. Engstrum for Muscle Shoals, and offer of Charles L. Parsons for properties at Muscle Shoals, Ala.”

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, February 16, 1922, 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>36</sup> Zucker, *George W. Norris*, 88.

<sup>37</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Muscle Shoals: Hearings before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry: Part One*, 67th Congress, 2nd session, April 10, 1922, 20.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., April 18, 1922, 145.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., April 19, 1922, 183.

<sup>41</sup> Marguerite Owen, *The Tennessee Valley Authority* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 11.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Muscle Shoals: Hearings before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry: Part Two*, 67th Congress, 2nd session, May 1, 1922, 278.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., May 4, 1922, 320.

<sup>45</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Muscle Shoals: Hearings before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry: Part Three*, 67th Congress, 2nd session, May 4, 1922, 340.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>47</sup> “Norris Shows Anger Over Ford’s Offer: Senator Declares Muscle Shoals Lease Could Be Sold at 1,000 Per Cent,” *New York Times*, May 10, 1922, 8.

<sup>48</sup> “Merchants Oppose Ford Nitrate Plan: Declare Muscle Shoals Would Entail Big Loss to the Government,” *Washington Post*, September 4, 1921, 5.

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<sup>57</sup> “Norris Shows Anger Over Ford’s Offer: Senator Declares Muscle Shoals Lease Could Be Sold at 1,000 Per Cent. Advance,” *New York Times*, May 10, 1922, 8Y.

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<sup>62</sup> Norris, *Fighting Liberal*, 286.

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<sup>70</sup> “Plans Compromise on Muscle Shoals: Reece Offers Three Proposals to Reconcile Senate and House Positions,” *New York Times*, November 30, 1930, 2.

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### Images:

Page 10: “POWER TO WIN. 10 YEARS OF TVA,” poster, 1941-1945, National Archives and Records Administration, via Wikimedia Commons, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ac/POWER\\_TO\\_WIN\\_10\\_YEARS\\_OF\\_TVA\\_-\\_NARA\\_-\\_515880.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ac/POWER_TO_WIN_10_YEARS_OF_TVA_-_NARA_-_515880.jpg) (accessed December 23, 2016).

Page 17: “George W. Norris,” portrait, 1918-1921, Library of Congress, via Wikimedia Commons, <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/58/GeorgeWNorris.jpg> (accessed December 23, 2016).

Page 31: “Norris Dam (1936) - Construction Worker Facing Dam,” picture, 1936, via Flickr, [https://c2.staticflickr.com/6/5492/9134563415\\_322bcd7860\\_b.jpg](https://c2.staticflickr.com/6/5492/9134563415_322bcd7860_b.jpg) (accessed December 23, 2016).

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Page 45: “Wendell Willkie (cropped),” portrait, March 30, 1940, Library of

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